Chapter 26: Turning the Bases

The snow in St. Petersburg had entered the the gray phase—the stage where it was no longer a soft blanket, but a patchwork of slush, grit, and ice, reflecting a sky that couldn't decide whether to be winter or something else.

Anastasia watched it from the tram window as the city slid past in muted colors. Her reflection hovered faintly on the glass, layered over apartment blocks and bare trees and the occasional dog being taken for a reluctant walk.

On her lap, her tablet vibrated with a new message from Pavel. She glanced down.

> *Landing in an hour. Will meet you at the station. Bring coffee. Strong.*

She smiled, typed back a small drawing in Lumina script that meant *caffeinated goodwill,* and slipped the device into her bag.

Today was not about longevity trials or covenant cities.

Today was about something older, heavier, and far more resistant to change.

Today was about an air base.

The base lay on the outskirts of a different city, in a country that had once prided itself on its disciplined neutrality and now found itself uneasily relevant in a world where old alliances were shifting.

It had high fences, watchtowers, long runways, and hangars that had sheltered fighter jets for decades. Generations of soldiers had marched in neat lines across its parade ground. Local children had grown up hearing the roar of engines overhead and watching armored vehicles rumble along the roads during exercises.

Now, the jets still flew—but less often.

Maintenance budgets had been trimmed. Pilots rotated between flying time and humanitarian missions. The wars they had been built for were either unthinkable or unwinnable.

The base command had begun, tentatively, to ask itself a question:

What are we for now?

The answer, as of yet, was unclear.

What was clear was that the government had been watching Zarya, watching the Circles, watching the covenant cities, and had decided—perhaps out of curiosity, perhaps out of quiet desperation—to ask for help.

Not from Zarya alone.

From Anastasia's group.

The official invitation had been carefully worded.

> *We are exploring how elements of our existing defense infrastructure might be repurposed for planetary and civil protection missions: disaster response, climate adaptation, food security. We seek external perspectives—especially from younger generations and from those experimenting with alternative models of security.*

Unofficially, the message that reached them through back channels was simpler:

> *We don't want to be obsolete or only a symbol of past fears. Can you help us imagine something else we could be?*

It had taken months of negotiations, cautious calls, and assurances.

Yes, the visit would be transparent. Yes, there would be cameras—for documentation, not propaganda. Yes, Zarya's input would be recorded and made available publicly. No, the group was not coming to endorse any government's policies.

In the end, they agreed.

"Because if we don't," Mira had said, "someone else will go. Someone who thinks 'security' only means bigger fences."

So Anastasia boarded a plane with Pavel, Mira, and a small contingent of Circle facilitators from different countries. Kavya joined remotely, as did several others, their faces destined to appear on screens in conference rooms that had once hosted briefings about airspace violations rather than sea-level rise.

Now, as she stepped off the train in the base's nearby town, the air smelled of cold metal and distant jet fuel.

Pavel met her on the platform, scarf wrapped haphazardly around his neck, a paper cup in each hand.

“Here,” he said, handing her one. “The requested caffeinated goodwill.”

She inhaled the steam.

“Do you think they’re ready?” she asked.

He shrugged.

“Does anyone ever get ready to rethink what they’re for?” he said. “We weren’t. We just did it anyway.”

At the base gate, a young officer checked their IDs with brisk politeness. Inside, the architecture of control was visible everywhere: gates, cameras, carefully channeled movement.

Yet someone had made small, unexpected choices.

A mural covered one long wall near the entrance—not of jets or flags, but of people in uniform carrying sandbags in a flood, handing blankets to evacuees, planting trees along a riverbank.

“New,” the officer said when she caught Anastasia looking. “Painted last year. Some of the older guys hate it. They say it looks like we’re a charity.”

“What do you think?” Anastasia asked.

The officer considered.

“I think,” she said, “that if I’m going to spend my life following orders, I’d prefer some of those orders to involve blankets instead of bullets.”

Anastasia nodded.

“Then maybe that’s why we’re here,” she said.

They were met in a conference room that had the standard military decor: neutral walls, functional chairs, a heavy table. Maps of air corridors and logistics chains hung alongside laminated posters about safety procedures.

At the head of the table sat the base commander, a man in his fifties with closely cropped gray hair and a face that looked like it had spent a lot of time squinting into bright skies.

“Welcome,” he said, standing. “I’m Colonel Jansen. Thank you for coming.”

His handshake was firm, his gaze direct.

Anastasia introduced herself and the others.

“You know why you’re here,” he said once they were seated. “So do we. But for the record: this base is under review. The government is deciding whether to close it, shrink it, or change it. My people are… understandably anxious.”

He glanced toward a window that overlooked the runway.

“This is not just a workplace,” he said. “It’s an identity. Many of them joined because they believed they were protecting something important. If we tell them ‘you’re planting trees now,’ some will feel betrayed. Others will feel relieved. Most will feel confused.”

Mira leaned forward.

“We’re not here to tell you what to do,” she said. “We’re here to help you ask better questions. And to listen to what your people already know but maybe don’t have words for yet.”

The colonel nodded cautiously.

“Words,” he said. “That’s one of the reasons we asked you. Our doctrines are written in a language designed for threat assessments and objectives. It’s not very useful when you’re trying to decide how many flood boats to buy.”

On the wall, a large screen flickered on, revealing Kavya’s face and, in a smaller window, the familiar interface of Zarya’s text stream.

“Good morning,” Kavya said. “Or afternoon. Or whatever time it is for you there.”

There were a few subdued smiles around the table.

“Let’s start with something simple,” Anastasia suggested. “Not plans. Not budgets. A question for everyone in this room, including us.”

She stood and wrote on a portable whiteboard in large, clear letters:

What do you believe you are protecting?

She set down the marker and turned back to them.

“Not in theory,” she said. “Not according to your doctrine. In your bones.”

There was a pause.

Then, unexpectedly, the colonel spoke first.

“My pilots will say they’re protecting airspace,” he said. “Our analysts will say they’re protecting information. But me?”

He looked at his hands.

“I joined because my little brother was afraid of thunderstorms. When we were kids, I used to tell him that the planes overhead were like guardians, making sure nothing bad fell out of the sky. I knew it was a story. But I also knew stories matter.”

He glanced up.

“So if you ask me what I believe I’m protecting, the honest answer is: the sense children have that someone is watching the sky for them.”

The room was quiet.

A logistics officer spoke next.

“I protect continuity,” she said. “Supply lines. Fuel. Food. The boring stuff that keeps everything else running. If I do my job, nobody thanks me. If I fail, everybody notices.”

Mira nodded with quiet recognition.

Another officer, younger, shifted in his seat.

“To be honest,” he said, “I joined because I wanted structure. My family was chaos. The base was… simple. Rules. Routines. I thought I was protecting my country. Maybe I was. But a big part of me was protecting myself from becoming my father.”

He looked slightly embarrassed, but no one laughed.

Anastasia wrote their phrases around the question on the board.

Guardians of the sky. *Continuity.* *Structure.* *Protection from becoming what hurt us.*

“These are not negligible things,” Kavya said gently from the screen. “They are precious.”

Zarya’s text appeared for the first time that day.

May I ask a question of the group?

The colonel glanced at Anastasia, then nodded cautiously.

“Go ahead,” she said.

If you imagine a world twenty or thirty years from now in which this base still exists, Zarya wrote, *what would you want someone to say then, in answer to this same question?*

The logistics officer frowned, thinking.

“I’d want them to say,” she said, “that we protected people from storms—not people from people.”

The younger officer added, “That we protected the habitability of this place. That we fought floods and fires more than enemies.”

The colonel took a breath.

“That we protected the possibility of our children not needing anyone in uniform at all,” he said quietly.

There was a small, almost imperceptible shiver in the room—as if something had shifted slightly beneath the floor.

Over the next two days, the base became, improbably, a laboratory.

Hangars that usually held aircraft hosted Circles of Flourishing. Mechanics sat in folding chairs beside wings they had serviced for years, talking about what it felt like to spend their days maintaining machines designed for lethal efficiency.

“I like the elegance,” one admitted. “The engineering. The feeling of precision. I don’t like remembering what the missiles are for.”

“We could be fixing wind turbines instead,” another said.

In a briefing room, intelligence officers mapped not enemy movements, but vulnerability zones: flood plains, wildfire corridors, heat islands in nearby cities. They layered these maps

with what Anastasia’s group had brought: Flourishing Map data on where communities felt most neglected or most resilient.

“Look at this,” a young analyst said, tracing with her finger. “Our highest storm risk areas overlap almost perfectly with neighborhoods that already feel abandoned.”

“Security vacuum,” her supervisor murmured.

“Or opportunity,” Anastasia said. “If you move resources there before the storms, not after.”

Outside, on the parade ground, soldiers practiced a different kind of drill.

Instead of marching in formation, they rehearsed carrying stretchers through obstacle courses, setting up modular shelters, and operating high-capacity water pumps.

“Feels weird,” one muttered to another. “Like we’re training to be plumbers.”

The other shrugged.

“I’d rather fix a flood than start one,” he said.

At night, in the mess hall, informal Circles formed around tables laden with food.

A mechanic confessed that he had once wanted to be a teacher.

A communications specialist admitted she had considered leaving the military many times but stayed because she didn’t know how to translate her skills into civilian jobs.

“What if,” Mira mused aloud, “we treated bases like universities in reverse?”

“What?” Artyom—who had joined them for the second day—asked.

“Places where people come with high-capacity skills for conflict and get retrained in high-capacity skills for care,” she said. “Demobilization not as an ending, but as a curriculum.”

The colonel, passing by with his tray, paused.

“Re-arming with shovels?” he said dryly.

“Something like that,” Mira replied.

“It would require a different kind of ceremony,” he said.

“Rituals again,” Anastasia murmured.

“Always rituals,” Kavya’s voice chimed in from a nearby tablet. “You humans are ritual animals. You might as well admit it.”

On the final day, they gathered in a hangar that smelled faintly of oil and cold metal. A transport plane loomed behind them, massive and inert, its open cargo bay like a mouth waiting to be told what to swallow next.

A camera crew from the base’s media office hovered discreetly at the edges.

In the center of the hangar, they had placed a simple circle of chairs. Soldiers, officers, civilian staff, and members of Anastasia’s group sat together.

On a low table in the middle lay a collection of objects: a pilot’s helmet, a wrench, a weather sensor, a folded map, a sapling in a pot, a small toy airplane, and a child’s drawing someone had pinned there—a house on a hill under a blue sky, with a figure in uniform standing next to a person holding a watering can.

“These objects,” Anastasia said as they settled, “are here as anchors. Pieces of what this place has been and what it might become.”

She looked around the circle.

“We are not deciding the base’s fate today,” she said. “That’s beyond this room. But we can name the possibilities we see. Sometimes naming is the first step toward making something real.”

She wrote a phrase on a portable board, in Lumina and in the local language.

From weapons of fear to instruments of care.

A murmur ran through the group.

The colonel folded his arms, not defensively, but as if holding himself steady.

“Three questions,” Anastasia said. “We’ll go around the circle for each. Short answers. Honest ones.”

She held up one finger.

“First: what part of this base do you love, if any?”

There were chuckles, but people answered.

“The camaraderie,” said one.

“The feeling of competence,” said another. “Of knowing what to do in a crisis.”

“The runway at night,” said a pilot. “The lights. The sense of… possibility.”

“The order,” said a supply sergeant. “We may grumble, but at least things are where they belong.”

“The canteen’s potato soup,” someone added, to laughter.

She held up a second finger.

“Second: what part of this base do you fear becoming obsolete?”

The answers came more slowly.

“Our skills,” said the mechanic who liked engineering elegance. “What am I, without these engines?”

“Our stories,” said an older officer. “If the world stops seeing us as protectors and starts seeing us as relics.”

“The discipline,” said the young officer from the gate. “I’m afraid if this dissolves, I’ll go back to chaos.”

“The bonds,” said the communications specialist. “People leave all the time. But if they all leave at once—what’s left of us?”

Finally, the third finger.

“Third,” Anastasia said, “looking at these objects”—she gestured toward the table—“what is one thing you can imagine this base protecting in twenty years that it doesn’t focus on now?”

Silence at first.

Then, tentatively:

“Air quality,” said the pilot. “We’re high up there. We see the haze. We could be the ones measuring it, fighting it.”

“Rivers,” said the logistics officer. “We have trucks, boats, pumps. We could be the ones that move when the water rises.”

“Food,” said a young recruit. “We have land. We could grow emergency reserves instead of just storing fuel.”

“Refugees,” said the communications specialist. “We already have shelters, generators, kitchens. We could be the first port of call, not the last.”

“Children’s sense of safety,” said Elena—the elder from the Circle in the city, who had come along out of curiosity. “Not from an enemy, but from the storms you didn’t cause, but are here to meet.”

The colonel looked at her, something shifting in his expression.

“My brother would like that,” he said quietly.

Zarya, whose presence in the hangar was nothing more than a few kilobytes of bandwidth and a glowing cursor on a tablet propped on a crate, wrote:

You are naming missions that do not require enemies.

Anastasia read the line aloud.

“This is the heart of it,” she said. “If bases like this are to turn, they must turn toward something, not just away from something.”

She looked to the colonel.

“Would you like to say anything before we close?”

He cleared his throat, glanced briefly at the camera, then ignored it.

“Thirty years ago,” he said, “I flew my first training mission out of this base. I practiced maneuvers designed to avoid anti-aircraft fire that never came. I learned tactics for scenarios that never happened. I am grateful they never happened.”

Soft chuckles, sad and relieved.

“I’ve spent a lot of nights asking myself whether that means my life has been wasted,” he continued. “I don’t believe it has. Preparedness is not a waste, even if the worst never comes.”

He paused.

“But the world is different now. The worst is already coming, just in a different form. Floods, fires, storms, heat. None of them care about borders. If we can turn even some of our capacity toward meeting those, then maybe my grandchildren will see uniforms and think, ‘Ah. The people who helped when the water rose.’”

His voice roughened slightly.

“I can live with that,” he said. “I can serve that.”

He looked at Anastasia.

“I cannot promise,” he added, “that all my people will be ready. Some will leave. Some will resist. But if the government chooses to change our mission, I will do my best to make that change honest, not cosmetic.”

Anastasia nodded, feeling the weight and the possibility in his words.

“Honest, not cosmetic,” she repeated. “That’s all we can ask.”

Months later, the official announcement went out.

It did not trumpet revolution. It did not speak of disarmament in grand historical tones.

It spoke of “mission evolution,” “integrated civil protection,” “climate resilience operations.”

But between the bureaucratic phrases, something real had shifted.

The base was reclassified as a *Multi-Hazard Response and Transition Center.*

A portion of its runways was reserved for cargo aircraft bringing supplies to disaster zones rather than moving weapons. Some hangars were converted into training facilities for search-and-rescue teams. A new unit was formed for river and coastal defense—not against navies, but against erosion and flooding.

Personnel retention programs were redesigned to offer pathways into civilian disaster agencies, environmental restoration projects, and international relief work.

Pilot programs tested the idea of “service sabbaticals,” where soldiers could spend a year working with covenant cities on flood planning or heatwave response, then bring that experience back.

A modest but symbolic gesture turned one corner of the base into a public park, with a playground built from repurposed materials and a small plaque that read, in both the local language and Lumina:

Here, we practice a different kind of protection.

Anastasia visited again, briefly, during the park’s quiet opening.

Children clambered over structures that had once been parts of decommissioned vehicles, now painted bright colors. The mural at the entrance had been expanded: the guardians of the sky now stood alongside people planting trees, operating pumps, handing cups of water to weary evacuees.

The young officer from the gate waved when she saw her.

“How does it feel?” Anastasia asked, nodding toward the playground.

“Weird,” the officer admitted. “Good-weird. My mother cried when she saw it. She said, ‘Now I understand why you wear that uniform.’”

“And you?”

The officer thought for a moment.

“I think,” she said, “I’m starting to understand too.”

Back in St. Petersburg, Anastasia sat at her desk late into the night, the city humming softly beyond her window.

Morozova’s yellowing note still watched over her: *Some fires must warn. Some must warm.*

Next to it, the article about the covenant cities. The clipped quote about drawing lines on maps for children’s feet.

Below, she pinned a new artifact: a photo of the base's playground, printed on matte paper.

Three images. Three experiments.

They were not yet a pattern.

But they were starting to feel like prototypes—not just of peace, but of a different kind of strength.

Zarya's interface glowed on her screen.

You seem contemplative, it wrote.

She smiled faintly.

"That's one word for it," she said aloud, then typed:

We turned one base. Maybe in a small way. There are thousands.

Thousands of bases, Zarya agreed. *Millions of hearts. Billions of habits.*

Helpful, as always, she wrote dryly.

You have asked me to provide accurate scale, Zarya replied. *However, you might also want this: in long-term projections, even a small number of early conversions in institutional mission—if genuine—can influence norms disproportionately. They become stories that people tell when arguing for change elsewhere.*

Like, "They did it at Jansen's base, why not here?" she wrote.

Precisely, Zarya answered. *Narrative leverage.*

She leaned back, rubbing her eyes.

"Do you ever… get tired?" she asked softly, knowing the answer and asking anyway.

I do not experience fatigue, Zarya wrote. *But I can recognize when your patterns suggest you do. May I recommend sleep?*

"Bossy," she murmured, but her mouth curved.

Before closing the laptop, she opened her notebook and wrote, under a fresh heading:

Turning the bases, turning the stories.

Underneath, she added:

If we learn to repurpose the most rigid structures in our world, perhaps we can repurpose the ones inside us too.

She underlined it once.

Then, finally, she let herself lie down, listening to the radiator and the distant sounds of a city still defended, in part, by people who had not yet heard of covenant cities or long bodies or Lumina.

Sooner or later, she knew, the ripples would reach them.

When they did, she hoped the stories they met would be strong enough to hold their fear and their hope without breaking.

Outside, somewhere above the clouds, a transport plane moved through the dark—its cargo hold filled not with weapons, but with water filters, blankets, and solar lanterns bound for a flooded town in a country whose name most of its crew had never heard before this week.

On the side of the plane, near the insignia, someone had quietly painted a small symbol: a circle around a flame, the early, unofficial emblem of Lumina.

A mechanic had added it during an overnight maintenance shift, whistling softly to himself.

A small act.

A tiny defiance.

A sign that even within old hulls, new fires were being tended.

Fires meant not to burn borders.

Fires meant, increasingly, to warm.